

HUMAN HAND PETROGLYPHS

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Introduction

Although the depiction of the human hand is relatively common in rock art during both prehistoric and Historic times, the motive(s) for the depiction of this motif remain subject to speculation. Two previously unrecorded examples of Historic "handprints" are examined, with a brief review of previously recorded prehistoric and Historic occurrences.

Terminology

Although the term "handprints" is commonly used in rock art, technically this term should probably be reserved for pictographs made by the application of pigment from the hand to the rock. (There are also the rare instances wherein actual handprints have been preserved on copper artifacts, e.g., Baby 1962.) The term "hand imprint" is no less inaccurate for rock carvings, for such designs were not actually impressed into the solid rock. The same strictures apply to carved "footprints" and "pawprints," although the terms are probably too convenient for even archaeologists to avoid using.

Occurrence and Frequency

Swauger (1974) records a total of eleven human hand petroglyphs and 41 human foot petroglyphs in his Upper Ohio Valley survey; of these, identification of one at Brown's Island is dubious. In his survey of Ohio petroglyphs (1984), he reported three hand petroglyphs and 24 foot petroglyphs, but one of these latter (Leo, Jackson Co.) he admitted is paw-like, and I would consider it to represent an animal paw. All of these he believed to be prehistoric. Since then, two additional prehistoric hand petroglyphs have been reported from Ohio, an engraved slate pendant from South Park (Brose) and a carving at the Barton Petroglyph Site (Murphy et al. 2006). Other prehistoric examples known from Ohio include the Newark Track Rocks or Hanover Petroglyphs in Licking Co. and the Tycoon Lake Petroglyph in Gallia County. In Kentucky, Coy et al. (1997: 150) record only two hand petroglyphs as opposed to 15 "footprints." In Missouri, Diaz-Granados and Duncan (2000: 164) also find the hand motif much more limited in quantity and distribution than the foot motif and describe the hands as ranging from prints to skeletal hands to "enlarged or abnormally 'fat' hands." These are distinctions that are not made entirely clear by the line drawings provided.

Lenik (2002), in a comprehensive treatment of petroglyphs in the northeastern United States, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, describes nine hand carvings (including a pair) and only three (includ-

ing a pair) foot designs, an interesting if inexplicable contrast with the Ohio Valley. In any event, hand prints are considerably less common than foot prints in Ohio and the Midwest, perhaps because unlike the foot carvings they are not usually directional (that is, there is no finger-pointing).

The Barnesville Hand, Belmont County, Ohio

This carving lies on a flat sandstone boulder a short distance to the north or northwest of the better known Barnesville Track Rocks bearing prehistoric carvings (Swauger 1974, 1984, Murphy 2009). It does not seem to be associated with any other figural carvings, although there are some initials adjacent to it, most noticeably the letters "S.H." and what appears to be the numeral "5." The carving represents the outline of a left hand, as is usually the case with such outlined hand petroglyphs. The most logical reason for this is-- if I recollect accurately from grade school-- that it is easier for right-handed people to draw an outline of their left hand than their right, and right-handedness is a dominant trait (whether genetic or acquired). The Barnesville hand is not pecked but clearly incised with a sharp object.

The Rice's Landing Hand, Fayette County, Pennsylvania

This carving was made on the face of a large sandstone boulder lying in the bed of a small stream at the northern end of Rice's Landing, Fayette Co., Pennsylvania. It lies only a few yards upstream from an abandoned railroad grade that has been converted to a bike or walking path. As with the Barnesville example, the Rice's Landing carving represents the left hand and is narrowly incised, not pecked. One interesting feature is an incised line traversing the thumb, apparently intended to distinguish the thumbnail. The carving clearly is related to the adjacent initials "C.H." and the date of 1896 (which is pecked). Attempts to identify "C.H." in the 1900 Fayette Co. federal census proved inconclusive.

Interpretation

Swauger (1974) and Coy et al. (1997) conclude that they cannot explain the meaning or the usages of prehistoric hand petroglyphs, and philosophically I am more in tune with them than with more recent workers such as Lenik, who is able to conclude (2002:122) that a pecked handprint at Betty's Neck, Massachusetts, was made by "a shaman who has marked this area as a sacred site." Perhaps so. At the Chestnut Street Site in Middleborough, Massachusetts, Lenik concludes that an

outlined hand "may represent shamanistic power," while an associated star or sun and an arrow signify an easterly direction along a trail (Ibid.: 118). Two incised left hands at Great Rock, also in Middleborough, Massachusetts, carved at different times, probably with a metal tool, are interpreted as Historic Indian. These carvings are sometimes interpreted as personal signatures or marks of ownership or as a memorial to King Philip (who was dismembered). Lenik prefers "a spiritual explanation," believing the carvings are "handprints of those shamans who have marked the site as sacred and who have attempted to derive power from the rock" (Ibid.: 120). Of interest on a more physical plane is the fact that a faint depression was created in one hand, suggesting the palm. At North Kingston, Rhode Island, the pecked outline of a left hand represents, Lenik suggests, "an attempt by an Indian to make contact with spiritual beings while on a vision quest" (Ibid.: 155). A similar design (pecked outline of left hand) is illustrated from Jericho, Long Island, New York (Ibid.: 183). The fingers and thumb were subsequently rubbed deeper into the rock. Similar carvings at Minisink Island, New Jersey, are interpreted as "those of a shaman who has marked the area as a sacred site" (Ibid.: 212). In a more extended discussion of rock art interpretation, Lenik (2009) concludes merely that "Handprints and footprints may be attempts to make contact with the spirit world." In his earlier book (Lenik 2002: 11) Lenik lists no fewer than thirteen possible interpretations, curiously omitting the idea that they are "teaching rocks" (Weeks 2002) Further afield, Ouzman (1998: 33) believes that hand prints and hand stencils in South Africa may encode non-visual meaning, the result of a desire to touch or have contact with the rock surface, which might be "an entrance to another reality." This is somewhat similar to Lenik's interpretation that petroglyphs may be "an attempt by the Indians to make contact with and gain access to the spiritual power and energy at a site" Lenik 2002:11).

While such magico-religious explanations may at least approximate the truth in some instances, my position accords more with that of Quinlan (2007: 140) who emphatically states that "By imputing a sacred quality to all rock art, and reacting against interpretations that try to demystify it by uncovering a latent social practicality to it, we run the risk of fetishizing our object of study and reinforcing public stereotypes about hunter-gatherer world views." Quinlan continues, "This preference for magico-religious explanations runs the risk of maintaining the myth of 'primitive

piety/ reinforcing public stereotypes about hunter-gatherer belief systems.”

In the case of Historic Euro-American hand carvings, interpretation may be less mystic-religious, especially when the carvings appear to be simple outlines or tracings of the artist's hand and are accompanied by name or initials and date. They are more likely merely a means of saying, “I was here.”

An exceptional Historic example that clearly conveys more than simply the presence of the carver/artist is Cliff's Rock, in eastern Tennessee (Weeks 2004). Here there are no fewer than three carved human hands, two buildings interpreted as meetinghouses or churches, and a crude depiction of the Confederate flag, as well as references to Lincoln and [General William] Rosecrans, which, together with Historic documentation provide an abundance of both content and context and permit correspondingly large amounts of speculation beyond the reasonable inference that the carvings represent an instance of “the spirit of Unionism in east Tennessee during the American Civil War.” Although the rock carvings do not include his signature or even a date, there is good reason to identify the carver as Col. William Clift, a Union officer who once owned the land. But even in this remarkable instance, the direct historical approach can carry us only so far, and Weeks is reduced to subjectivity and metaphor. Yes, the hand with an “L” carved on it must represent Lincoln, especially as it is immediately adjacent to the carved words “Lincoln Rise.” Very possibly the other large hand represents Rosecrans, although it occurs nowhere near Rosecrans' carved name, so that Weeks feels compelled to imagine that this hand was paired with a carved “statement” about Rosecrans no longer preserved (although there is a “Rosecrans Rise” statement integrally associated with one of the meetinghouse carvings). A smaller, third hand near the southern edge of the rock, it is suggested, is a metaphor for the seceding Southern states. More convincingly, a rectangle with an X across it is interpreted as representing the Confederate flag; however, it is nowhere near the small hand imagined to represent the Confederacy. Thus, even when a group of Historic carvings can be reasonably associated with a particular individual, his handiwork may defy straightforward interpretation and almost inevitably invites speculation and flights of fancy.

Conclusion

Prehistoric human hand carvings have elicited a variety of interpretations by archaeologists. At least one example, on a portable petroglyph (engraved celt) can reasonably be interpreted as a symbol attributable to the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (Brose 1971). Others may more simply be intended to indicate the presence or existence of the carver at that

particular place. More abstruse interpretations are also possible and provide a virtually limitless opportunity for archaeologists to exercise their imagination.

In the instance of the two Historic examples documented in this article, it seems clear that there was no more complicated intent than indicating that, Kilroy like, the carver was here. More complex Historical examples are known, such as the Clift's Rock petroglyph, in which at least one of the carved hands is clearly intended to represent someone other than the carver, so that it is reasonable to assume that some prehistoric hand carvings might be equally complicated in intent, if not even more so (and also correspondingly more difficult to interpret scientifically).

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Figure 1 (Murphy). The Barnesville Hand.



Figure 2 (Murphy) The Rice's Landing Hand.